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This Is the Netflix Exec to Thank for Your *Wild Wild* *Country* Binge

Lisa Nishimura, the streaming giant's head of documentary and comedy programming, is changing the way filmmakers and viewers approach nonfiction TV.

by JOY PRESS

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Netflix's Lisa Nishimura, photographed at home, in Los Angeles.

Photograph by Patrick Ecclesine.

CLOSE

In July 2015, filmmakers Chapman and Maclain Way pitched a documentary series to Netflix executive Lisa Nishimura that they had spent the previous year developing. The brothers knew they had a compelling tale in the long-forgotten story of Rajneeshpuram, a commune in rural Oregon built in the 1980s by the followers of an Indian guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. The brothers' project encompassed free love, Utopianism, attempted murders, arson, and bioterrorism. Still, they worried that what they had in mind fell too far outside the realm of the traditional true-crime documentary to be of wide interest.

"We already know what the crimes were; people already pled guilty to these crimes, so there's not a lot of detective investigation work," Maclain says. Instead, the brothers' aim was more adventurous: "It was really about peeling back the cultural and political layers and re-examining what led this group to commit the largest biochemical terrorist attack in the history of the United States."

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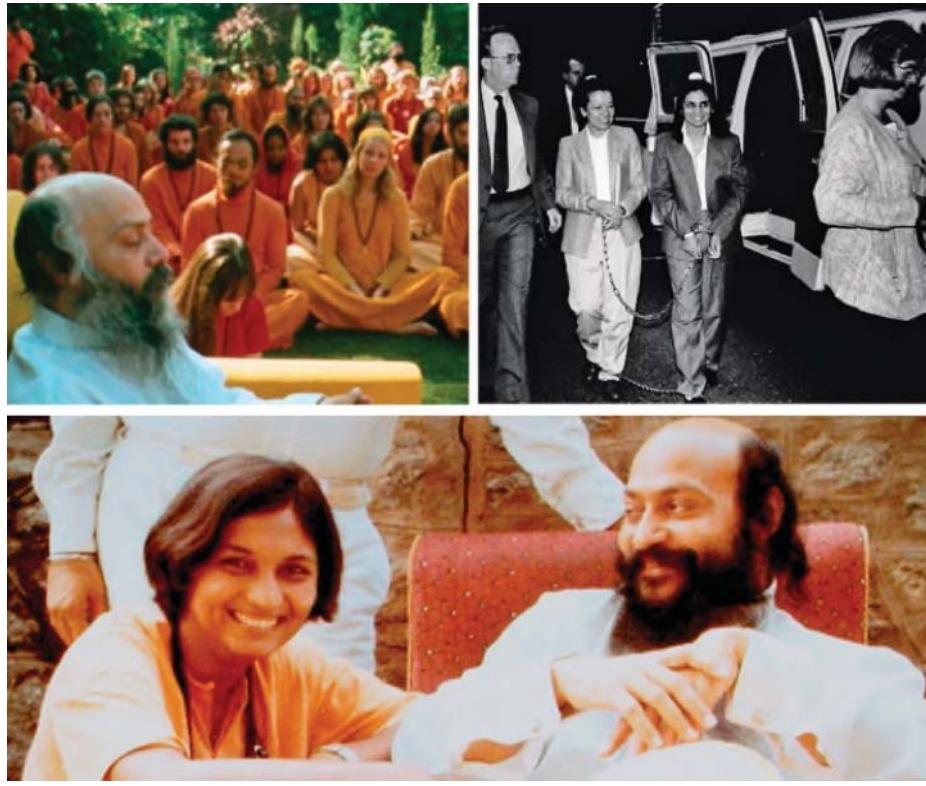
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The duo had already spoken to several potential distributors when they sat down with Nishimura and her team. Maclain says most of them were looking for "a very name-recognizable story or biopic, or a subject that they feel has somewhat of a built-in audience."

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Nishimura was not discouraged by the lack of bold-faced names in the project, or by the fact that the brothers wanted to tell it across six and a half hours. She saw in *Wild Wild Country* a chance to tell a true story in a style as complicated, vivid, and character-driven as a prestige-TV drama. In fact, she already had something like that in the works: *Making a Murderer*, a series investigating circumstances surrounding a Wisconsin man's conviction, which would become a worldwide sensation.



In *Wild Wild Country*, clockwise from top left: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, leader of the Rajneeshpuram community; followers Ma Shanti Bhadra and Ma Anand Puja; Rajneesh with top lieutenant Ma Anand Sheela. Photographs courtesy of Netflix.

If *Making a Murderer* launched Nishimura's reputation as a queen of the docu-series when it premiered in December 2015, *Wild Wild Country* cemented it this spring. After the cult documentary's March release, viewers obsessed over every outrageous detail and delectated in the vintage jewel-colored clothing. Actress Mandy Moore even posted photos from her *Wild Wild Country*-themed party on Instagram. Ma Anand Sheela—secretary to the guru and the charismatic anti-heroine of the series—became a global celebrity in her own right.

Nishimura saw in the brothers a talent for “allowing human beings their full complexity,” she says, as well as a knack for suspenseful storytelling. “All hats off to Chap and Mac Way, who let you think ‘I’m absolutely behind the Rajneeshes’ one second, and then the next episode you are like, ‘Wait a second, I am absolutely behind the community of Antelope!’,” Nishimura says. “What you learn is that life is messy and all sides of a story have 100 percent conviction that they are on the right side of reason.” Nishimura’s nose for such stories has helped make Netflix a prime force in audiences’ growing interest in nonfiction programming, which is key to the company’s play for total TV dominance.

Most mornings, Nishimura is up at dawn to screen films before her husband and son wake up in their Spanish-style home on the Westside of Los Angeles. It’s during this time of morning calm that she privately watches filmmakers probe the darkest corners of the human experience.

“I never lack awe at people,” she says with a laugh, curled up on a window seat. “Why people react the way they do, what are they hoping to achieve, what holds us back.”

Nishimura tells stories in great verbal waves, her thoughts pulling her forward with a kind of galloping enthusiasm. She regularly tacks “Right?” onto the end of her sentences, as if she has spent her life waiting for people to catch up with her ideas. In the hands of a great documentarian, she says, “you get to understand the way those individuals tick, right? And there is something magical about that.”

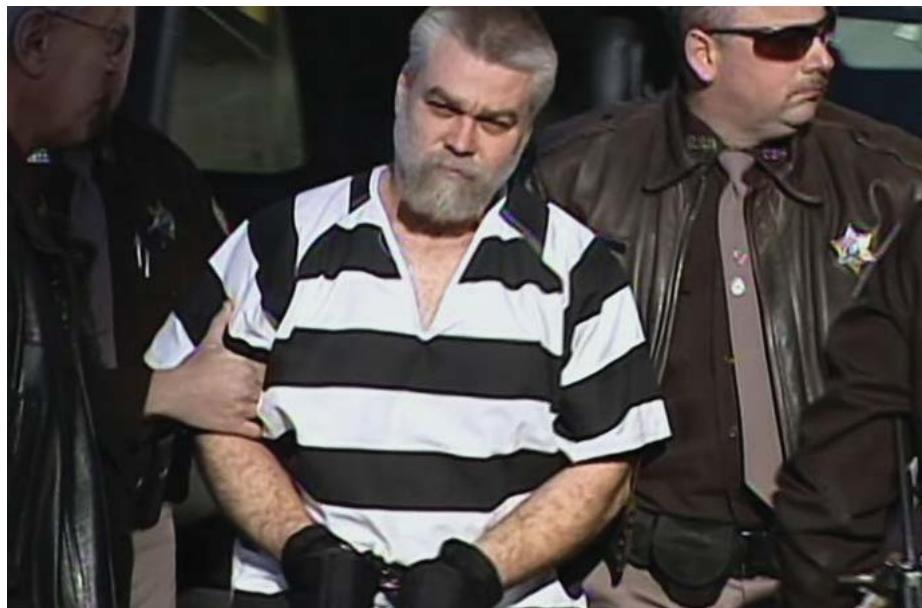
In early 2013, Nishimura was in charge of licensing documentaries for Netflix when she agreed to a brief sit-down with filmmakers Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos. The duo had spent roughly eight years gathering footage for what would be their first documentary, *Making a Murderer*, exploring a possible miscarriage of justice in the case of a Manitowoc, Wisconsin, man imprisoned for sexual assault, exonerated by DNA evidence after 18 years behind bars, and then convicted of a different crime. New developments in the case continued to unfurl, and the women had run out of funds. They hoped to coax Nishimura into taking a chance on an original long-form series. A 30-minute “get to know you” meeting evolved into a two-hour mind meld.



Courtesy of Netflix.



By Danielle Ricciardi/Netflix.

From top: *Making a Murderer* co-directors Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos; on location; subject and convicted killer Steven Avery. Courtesy of Netflix.

"I was completely engrossed in the story," Nishimura recalls. "On paper, the fact that these are first-time filmmakers might raise your blood pressure a little bit, but [not] if you looked them in the eye and saw the materials and the rigor."

At the time, Netflix had recently launched a slate of original scripted series—and, along with it, the idea of bingeable TV with *House of Cards* releasing all 13 episodes of its first season at once. Nishimura realized that *Making a Murderer* could do the same for documentary series. Although she occasionally panicked that no one outside of Manitowoc would want to take this harrowing ride through the Wisconsin legal system, Nishimura believed many people would be interested in the plight of Steven Avery. He was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a female photographer while he was suing the county for a previous, wrongful arrest. His 16-year-old nephew, Brendan Dassey, confessed to helping commit the crime after being interrogated without a parent or lawyer present.

"It's like, 'let's see what [Lisa] thinks,' because she's got great taste, and great instincts. She's a storyteller," says Ava Duverney.

The 10 hour-long episodes began streaming just before the holidays in 2015. Viewers across the globe devoured the true-crime series and stormed across social media wielding opinions and theories about the case. The documentary's subjects became household names, new legal appeals were filed, and *Making a Murderer* won four Emmys. Nishimura herself became a central node in the documentary eco-system—a veritable doc whisperer. Instead of licensing finished projects to stream on Netflix, she began actively luring some of the best and brightest filmmakers to the service, catalyzing and shaping ambitious new films.

As this newly stoked mass appetite for documentary entertainment (previously considered a niche interest) continued to grow, Netflix extended its dominance over the field. Even established filmmakers such as Liz Garbus, Ava DuVernay, and Errol Morris found it hard to resist the streamer's many charms: deep financial pockets, flexible formats, an audience of 120-plus million households around the globe, and a creative team led by Nishimura, who calls herself a "documentary nerd."

"In this town, we have so many executives," says DuVernay, who worked with Nishimura on *13th*, about mass incarceration in the U.S., and is currently developing another project with her. "I get notes from people and I'm like, 'Dude, you don't even know what you're talking about. . . . These notes don't make sense!' With Nishimura, she continues, "it's like, 'Let's see what she thinks,' because she's got great taste, and great instincts. She's a storyteller."

Nishimura grew up in Silicon Valley as the bi-lingual child of Japanese immigrants. "It was very much that traditional-immigrant 'Put your head down and work twice as hard' thing," she says. Her youth was crammed with Suzuki piano lessons and Saturday math classes. Her father, a chemist, encouraged her to watch science-based programming like PBS's *Nova*. And although her mother was an accomplished violinist, a career in the arts or entertainment industry seemed unthinkable. "What I do today was not even something I knew I could want to be," she says.

She'd planned to go to medical school after college, but Nishimura ended up extending an internship at an independent record label into a career in the music industry—much of it working with Chris Blackwell, founder of Island Records and Palm Pictures. "To be around him is to understand that it is always artist first," she says. "It really changes how you operate. . . . Chris was always like, 'What is the creative intent?'"

Tasked with marketing records (Brazilian bossa nova, German electronic music, Jamaican reggae) and, later, movies from around the world, Nishimura began to question why we treat art from abroad as a limited niche, a rarefied taste. She believed that making work easily available would entice audiences to come. While at Palm Pictures, in the early 2000s, Nishimura met Netflix chief content officer **Ted Sarandos** and vice president of original content Cindy Holland, who were buying DVDs for their upstart movie-rental service. Other buyers talked about films as units; Sarandos and Holland "wanted to talk about the filmmakers, the process, the creation," Nishimura says. "Like Claude Chabrol—they knew his history and his filmography!"

In 2007, the year Netflix introduced its streaming business—starting with about 1,000 movies and TV series, compared with more than 70,000 by-mail titles—Sarandos offered Nishimura a newly created job overseeing the acquisition of independent-studio content. The plan was to drastically expand the company's existing digital catalogue. "What was exciting was [that] it was the first *global job*, right? So I was buying anime from Japanese studios, I was buying Scandinavian horror shows, I was buying French drama, American independents," she says, as well as genres like stand-up comedy and documentaries that major American studios shunned.

Eventually, Nishimura narrowed her focus to docs and stand-up; her title now is vice president of original documentary and comedy programming. Holland says that although the two genres aren't an obvious combination they both tend to involve artists "telling their stories and evaluating what's happening in the world through their particular lenses. . . . And Lisa is really, really good at supporting people in digging out and illuminating their specificity."



Photograph by Patrick Ecclesine.

Nishimura became a documentary evangelist, convinced that decreasing box-office figures for the genre proved only that people did not want to go see that kind of movie in a theater. Netflix's own DVD-rental and streaming data proved that audiences eagerly sought nonfiction movies to watch at home. (Although Netflix won't share ratings figures with the public, Nishimura says 75 percent of its subscribers have watched a documentary on the service.) And the company's algorithms constantly personalize each subscriber's home page, so that if a user loves foreign films or documentaries those types of films might be framed on his or her Netflix home page on equal footing with a superhero blockbuster. Content isn't ghettoized by genre, in other words, but "presented to you based on tone and timbre," Nishimura says. "When you want to watch something, you think about how you want to feel. You think about what experience you want to have. You don't wake up and say you want to watch something from a particular studio or watch that format."

This is wreaking havoc with some long-standing industry rules and traditions. Take the ongoing controversy within awards bodies (and at the Cannes Film Festival) over whether to treat Netflix original feature films as movies or TV movies. Some projects have benefited from the chaos: *13th* got an Oscar nomination before proceeding to win four Emmy Awards. This year, Bryan Fogel's *Icarus*—an exposé of the state-sanctioned doping conspiracy inside Russian athletics—won an Academy Award and could very well be nominated for an Emmy. The same goes for Yance Ford's deeply personal Oscar nominee, *Strong Island*, which is eligible for an Emmy.

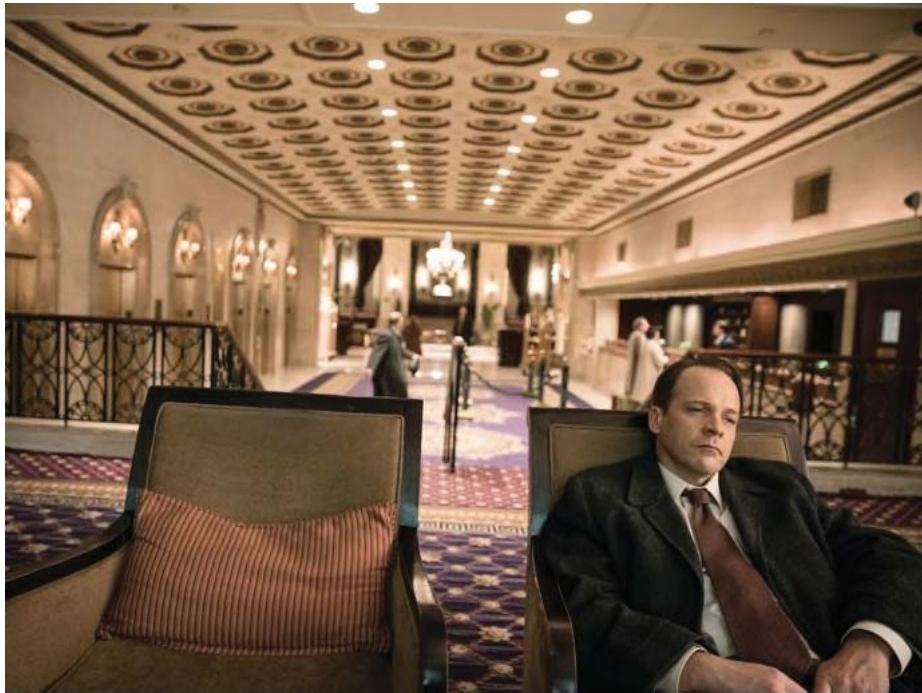
"Year over year you'll see the level of investment and commitment in the documentary space on the global level," says Nishimura.

"Listen, we absolutely respect the respective [film and TV] academies," Nishimura says carefully, fingering a delicate gold chain that hangs around her neck. "We understand that we are new and it does present new questions." But she says that, if the awards bodies' rules allow Netflix to submit their original programs, they're going to do so, for the sake of their filmmakers. "If you spend years and years of your life on this, having your peers recognize you is a huge deal. For a documentary filmmaker, if you are nominated or win an Academy Award, that is career changing."

The second original documentary Nishimura bought, Jehane Noujaim's 2013 cinéma-vérité film about the Arab uprising, *The Square*, brought the company its first Academy Award nomination. More followed for Netflix docs such as *Virunga* (which chronicled a violent battle over a gorilla sanctuary) and the Nina Simone biopic *What Happened, Miss Simone?* That almost certainly helped reassure filmmakers skittish about swapping the big-screen experience for a permanent home on Netflix.

The way Nishimura describes it, she wants to make the platform every documentarian's dream date, by giving them each what they want—and sometimes things they didn't know they needed. For *The White Helmets*, a short doc about rescue workers in war-torn Syria that won Netflix its first Oscar, it meant getting the film out quickly so the filmmakers could show the world what was happening there. For *13th*, it meant brainstorming

with DuVernay about ways to make difficult historical material more relatable via popular music and vivid graphics—and then bankrolling those pricey elements.



Peter Sarsgaard as doomed C.I.A. agent Frank Olson in the Errol Morris docudrama *Wormwood*.
By Zach Dilgard/Netflix.

When Errol Morris told her about his idea for *Wormwood*—an experimental project about the mysterious death of a C.I.A. operative that would merge documentary realism, psychedelia, and serious drama—Nishimura could not resist. She combined people from her doc team and Netflix’s drama-originals department to “cross-pollinate”; the result was a four-and-a-half-hour boundary-dissolving opus starring Peter Sarsgaard that was shot with 10 cameras by renowned cinematographer Ellen Kuras. Nishimura says she was hooked as soon as Morris mentioned that he didn’t think any place else would let him do this crazy thing. “I couldn’t fathom not trying!” she says, breaking into a giant smile.

Last month, at the Series Mania Festival, in Lille, France, Netflix C.E.O. Reed Hastings said that the company would be pulling away from the movie business in order to “mostly focus on series and standup, docuseries and great content we can do without disrupting or being perceived to disrupt the movie sector.” That can only be good news for Nishimura. Although she will not reveal what portion of Netflix’s reported \$8 billion content budget is allotted for original docs, Nishimura insists the number keeps increasing: “Year over year you will see the level of investment and commitment in the documentary space on the global level. . . . continue to grow.” It’s clearly enough cash to intimidate competitors in the doc world and to allow for deep, experimental dives into specific niches, like food. (Nishimura’s team is responsible for a raft of foodie series ranging from raucous gastro-travelogue *Ugly Delicious* to *Rotten*, a grim glimpse inside the food industry.)

Nishimura says Netflix measures a documentary’s success in a multitude of ways: awards and critical acclaim figure into the calculus, as does the size of viewership in relation to the cost of the project. Ideally, a film will resonate globally, which is why Nishimura spends a good deal of time traveling. But the best-case scenario is that a project goes viral, à la *Making a Murderer* and *Wild Wild Country*. Whether or not any Netflix documentaries win Emmys this year, Nishimura plans to keep feeding the hunger for reality-based stories. She says her favorite thing about meeting with Netflix subscribers is when someone tells her, “I saw this incredible movie and I was halfway through before I realized it was real life!”

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Casablanca

Humphrey Bogart is the dashing star of this poster, which also features co-stars Ingrid Bergman and Paul Henreid.
Photo: From Warner Bros/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock.



Joy Press is a TV Correspondent for *Vanity Fair*. Her book, *Stealing the Show: How Women Are Revolutionizing Television*, was released in February.

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